

Adventuring with the Student Conservation Association

by Brad Stoner



Brad Stoner, in his 4th internship with the Student Conservation Association, describes a stickleback to 4th and 5th graders at Headquarters Lake as part of the Get out & Get Dirty summer camp at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

I grew up in a small suburb of Los Angeles California. Then again, small is a relative term seeing as my home town of La Canada, California, has over 20,000 residents whereas Kenai and Soldotna combined are less than half of that population.

For as long as I can remember I wanted out of that crowded place. I decided to go to a smaller college where I got my B.S. in Criminal Justice with a minor in Environmental Studies. I choose that field of study only because I thought it would be interesting and I

had no real plans for a job.

That's when I found the Student Conservation Association or SCA. The SCA is an organization focused on introducing people of a variety of ages and backgrounds to the conservation career path through working as a volunteer at Federal agencies. Through the SCA you are exposed to career options you may never have known existed.

I first served with the SCA in Wisconsin at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). This was the first

time I ever lived completely alone. In fact, at night, there was nobody else ever closer than a mile. The stars, the nature sounds, and the thousands of fireflies took my breath away. During this position I had the opportunity to ride an airboat for the first time—it was absolutely amazing! I spent the evenings fishing for northern pike and my days were filled either running the visitor center or roving the trails and interacting with visitors. I've been hooked on the SCA ever since.

The following summer, I returned to the Midwest as an SCA intern, but this time I was stationed at Big Stone NWR on the border between Minnesota and South Dakota. As a Biological Technician, I helped conduct waterfowl surveys, and banded Canada Geese and Mourning Doves. Having grown up in a city, I had never before used a weed whacker or a mower and now I was given the opportunity to use both. I also learned how to tow and back up a trailer. And ever since I was little I have always wanted to ride in a fire truck and use the hose to put out a fire and at this position my dream came true...sort of. I used the fire hose to clean out the Refuge's pit toilets, but close enough.

I graduated from college in 2015 but still had not figured out what I wanted to do—the SCA was my answer once more. For 14 weeks as a Park Ranger at Sevilleta NWR in New Mexico I provided education programs to 4th grade classrooms twice a week in Albuquerque.

While there, a former contact at the SCA got me to apply for my current 12-week position here on the Kenai Peninsula, one of the most beautiful locations I have ever seen. During this summer, I'm back in an environmental educator role and have enjoyed spending the summer assisting with the summer camps hosted by the Refuge.

The SCA has not only helped shape my career path but the paths of hundreds, if not thousands, of both former and current interns serving for this wonderful organization. While I may not have my whole future planned out, I know I'll be in Homer for the next year. My concern that my time in Alaska would be painfully short was alleviated by my good fortune to obtain a 52-week internship at Alaska Maritime NWR, my fifth SCA position.

So, if you ever find yourself down in Homer, stop by the Alaska Islands and Oceans Visitor Center and say 'hi' to Ranger Brad. I would love to share more about my adventures and the SCA program (<http://www.thesca.org/>).

Brad Stoner graduated from California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, CA. Prior to Alaska, Brad worked in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, California and New Mexico. Find more information about Kenai Refuge at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.